

Was the CIA's Man in Havana a Do The Riddle of AM

By George Crile III

AM LASH is the cryptonym the CIA assigned to the senior Cuban official it had recruited in 1961 to kill Fidel Castro. The Agency's dealings with AM LASH, which continued up to a disastrous end in 1965, encompassed the longest-standing and, on the surface, the most likely to succeed of its numerous plots on Castro's life. It therefore seems a remarkable suspension of curiosity that the Senate Intelligence Committee, in its investigation of the CIA's assassination activities, passed so lightly over this critical chapter.

To begin with, any examination of AM LASH's history would suggest that he had for many years been far too close to insanity to be relied on in any sensitive operation. And from this a larger question presents itself. Was AM LASH actually a conscious double agent for Castro, or was he perhaps so transparent and emotionally exploitable that he unwittingly provided an equivalent service? And if so, and if Castro had become convinced that the United States would stop at nothing to kill him, could Castro have felt compelled to strike first?

AM LASH has never been publicly named. But his history is well known among Cuban exiles in Miami. He was a Cuban doctor, a former *comandante* of the rebel army, a hero of the revolution: Rolando Cubela, an intimate of Castro. The CIA persuaded the Senate Intelligence Committee not to identify Cubela, who is now in jail in Cuba. It maintains that alerting the Cubans to his role in early CIA plots would expose him to reprisals.

But this argument is specious. The Cuban government is filled with men who know Cubela and his history and who must have read the Church Committee's report. It is difficult to believe that Cubela now has any secrets from his captors. The only people who stand to gain from continued secrecy are those all too eager conspirators at the CIA. For the rest of us this story is essential if we are to begin to make sense of the events surrounding the secret but deadly struggle that was being fought in the autumn of 1963.

The Tortured Assassin

TO UNDERSTAND Cubela fully, it is necessary at once to introduce a Cuban exile in Miami, Jose Aleman, whose assertions are sufficiently important to make it worth reviewing his record for reliability.

Aleman was educated in the United States at Worcester Academy and then at the University of Miami. During the 1940s, his father was perhaps the most powerful man in Cuba. Nominally minister of education, he was a heavily guarded boodler and boss, whose most rewarding coup was to back a truck up to the Cuban treasury and make off with the Republic's foreign reserves. In Miami, he bought up most of Key Biscayne, retained Sen. George Smathers as his lawyer and invested as heavily in American politicians as in American real estate.

His son chose a different path. A young handsome idealist, he became, like Castro, revolutionary against the Batista regime. While Castro was in the mountains, Aleman

was helping to direct the most active and dangerous part of the revolution in Havana. He and four other young men — including Eugenio Rolando Martinez, the Watergate burglar — formed an underground cell that provided the arms for the almost successful attack on the Presidential Palace in 1957. Cubela was then one of the leaders of the student revolutionaries at the University of Havana, and he began to work closely with Martinez and Aleman.

"There were many nasty things we had to do to bring on the revolution," Aleman reflects. The most difficult was the decision to kill Blanco Rico, Batista's chief of military intelligence. The revolutionary logic of that day called for sparing sadistic officials because of the hatred they aroused. "Rico treated everyone like a gentleman. He wouldn't even torture people," Aleman explains. So he had to be done away with. "Rolando [Martinez] and I participated in the decision to get rid of him," and the man whom they assigned to kill him was Cubela.

In October, 1956, Cubela shot Rico through the head in the fashionable Montmartre night club. As he died, Rico caught Cubela's eyes and, Cubela believed, smiled understandingly at him. Cubela escaped to Miami where he moved into the Tradewinds Motel, one of the properties (including also the Miami Stadium) which Aleman owned there.

The Plotting Begins

IT IS HARD to imagine the confusion that marked the first year of revolutionary government. Not all the revolutionaries supported Castro. Many, and particularly those who had worked in Havana, mistrusted Fidel deeply but not more than he mistrusted them. Cubela had always been suspicious of Castro. But now he was one of the towering figures of the revolution, with an independent following. Castro needed his support, and Cubela responded to his advances by accepting an offer to become head of the politically powerful federation of students at the University.

Cubela exalted in his new-found status as a triumphant revolutionary. He drove about Havana in a gigantic touring car, drinking and womanizing. He was blissful in his dissipation until he killed a woman in a car accident, and again began hearing Rico at night. As before, he took to calling Aleman whenever he heard the voice.

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